

INDIA'S POLITICAL AND FOREIGN RELATIONS WITH THE GULF REGION



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INDIA AND THE UAE: EXPANDING FRONTIERS OF POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Venu Rajamony

Political and diplomatic relations between India – UAE must be seen in the larger context of the freedom of both countries from colonial rule and India's contacts with the Arab world in the run up to its independence. It is well known that even as India struggled for freedom, its leaders started debating the country's post-independence foreign policy and its stance on various international issues. Delegations from Arab nations and other countries attended sessions of the Indian National Congress prior to Independence.

Addressing the question of Palestine, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, wrote in the *Harijan* newspaper on November 26, 1938: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French"¹. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *The Hindu* newspaper on December 17, 1938 that "Palestine was an Arab country and Arab interests must prevail there".² This was then followed up with India's opposition to the UN proposal for the partitioning of Palestine in 1947.

India never viewed its fight against colonialism in isolation. Its leaders saw their cause as a movement that could transform the situation of all colonized countries, especially those of Asia and Africa. Solidarity with fellow Asian and African countries was a conviction and this was evident when India organized the Asian Relations Conference – which included representatives from many Arab countries – in New Delhi in 1947 and a summit of fifteen Asian countries in 1949. Reflecting his views on Asia, Nehru said: “We are of Asia and the peoples of Asia are nearer and closer to us than others. India is so situated that she is the pivot of Western, Southern, and Southeast Asia. In the past, its culture flowed to all these countries and they came to it in many ways. Those contacts are being renewed and the future is bound to see a closer union between India and Southeast Asia on one side, and Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab World on the other.”³

On October 7, 1954, while inaugurating the Indo-Arab Society in Bombay (now Mumbai), an organization to promote fraternal ties, Nehru referred to the distancing that had occurred between the Arab world and India in the intervening years. He said India’s relations with this region go “far back into the dawn of history,” but the bonds “snapped” 300 years ago, making contacts and exchanges difficult. “It was easier for us to meet in Berlin or Paris or in London than to meet in Asia,” Nehru added.⁴

Speaking at a reception held in honour of Crown Prince Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, who was also the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, in New Delhi in May 1955, Nehru, said: “I know no Arabic. But when I heard you speaking in that noble language, I felt I could understand many words used in a language which I have not studied at all I recalled all those contacts which have brought not only many words but so much wealth from other countries to India, and taken from India to other countries. . . . Your country has been connected with ours in many ways from the distant past, for long periods of time. Then came a period when we were cut off from each other, as indeed most countries of Asia were; strangely enough we had more contacts with the distant countries of Europe than with

each other. Now there is a new chapter beginning in our history. We are resuming these old contacts of ours, and long forgotten memories return to our minds.”⁵

These views led to India becoming a key member of the group, which successfully organised the Afro-Asian Summit in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, and which led to the genesis of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 at Belgrade under the leadership of Nehru, Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sukarno of Indonesia and Josip Tito of former Yugoslavia, among others.

As the British started withdrawing from the Gulf and the newly emerging Gulf countries started playing an important role on the global stage, they became natural partners with India in shaping a new world based on the principles of equality, friendship, and mutual cooperation. India, not surprisingly, was among the first nations to welcome the formation of the UAE Federation. If Indian presence in the UAE had a long history, conversely, for the people of the UAE, India was their window to the world. The long-standing trade relationship ensured the continuous flow of essential commodities, textiles, food, spices, and timber from Indian ports. Besides, Gulf residents had long availed themselves of India's well established educational and medical facilities, which advanced the cultural contacts between the countries. With the creation of the UAE in 1971, the old friends and partners forged a stronger relationship at the political level. The UAE also became a welcome entrant into the non-aligned fold, which was, by then, the main pillar of India's foreign policy. ⁶

Continuity Amidst Change

Even before the formal establishment of the UAE Federation, late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then President-elect of the Supreme Council of the Federation and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, was clear about expanding ties with India. In an interview, in 1970, with R. K. Karanjia, editor of the *Blitz* and doyen of Indian journalism, Sheikh Zayed said, “Our relations go back some

4,000 years when we had flourishing trade and commerce with India; and now that we are about to be independent, we would like these bonds to be restored and strengthened in every possible way . . . There are boundless possibilities for trade, commerce, even joint projects. We would welcome India's expertise for our development. We have already a fairly large and flourishing Indian community here and we are satisfied with them and always welcome more of them. But what we really need is technicians and experts in various fields of development . . . I am sure we can profit by Indian experiences. Describing his encounter with Sheikh Zayed, R.K. Karanjia wrote about the father of the UAE – *"I found Sheikh Zayed not only an impatient spirit racing with time to make amends to his people for a backward, underdeveloped tribal order to which they had been condemned over the centuries, but also a man with a historical mystique and humanistic philosophy strikingly his own."*

Sheikh Rashid's visit to India – a pioneering contact

The first important political contact at the highest level after the formation of the UAE was that of Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Vice-President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, in 1974. Sheikh Rashid, who later took office as Prime Minister of the UAE and ruled Dubai from 1958 until his death in 1990, was the first visionary of modern Dubai. During his reign, the emirate transformed from a small trading town into a cosmopolitan port city and commercial hub. His visit to India was significant because India was in the midst of an oil crisis resulting from high prices, following the 1973 oil shock and the UAE provided potential solutions to this issue.

An important dimension of the visit was that Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the young Defence Minister and the future Ruler of Dubai, was an integral part of the delegation, thus giving him a close and personal impression of India. In Delhi the UAE delegation was received by G. S. Pathak, Vice-President of India, and Minister of External Affairs Swaran Singh; in Bombay by Governor Ali Yawar Jung, and the then Home

Minister of Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar. During talks with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Rashid put forward a proposal to supply crude oil on soft terms of credit, expressed interest in importing food grains from India and invited Indian businessmen to actively participate in the development of the Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone (JAFZA). The results of the last expression of interest can be seen today, in that Indian businessmen now constitute the largest segment in JAFZA, as well as the other free zones in the UAE. During his three-day stay in Bombay, Sheikh Rashid visited the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Trombay Fertilizer factory, and Mazagon Docks. On his behalf, Sheikh Mohammed announced a grant of Rs 300,000 to the Indo-Arab Society. Sheikh Mohammed also paid a visit to the College of Military Engineering in Poona (Pune).⁸ "I was surprised then (in 1974) to see that a large number of Indian merchants came to meet us, and my father knew each one of them by name, and asked them all how they had been doing," Sheikh Mohammed recalled during his 2007 visit to India.⁹

Sheikh Zayed visits India

The momentum of this visit was maintained the following year by the UAE's founding father and first President, Sheikh Zayed. His high profile visit in 1975 set the framework for an even closer partnership between the two countries. Reflecting the importance that India attached to the visit, and in line with the practice of the time, Sheikh Zayed was received at the airport by President Dr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and Minister of External Affairs Y. B. Chavan.¹⁰

Recognizing India's skills and talent in science and technology, Sheikh Zayed funded the establishment of an institute of petroleum studies at the Aligarh Muslim University with a grant of USD 200,000.¹¹ Pranab Mukherjee, then Minister of State for Finance, was among the dignitaries who called on him, and an economic cooperation agreement was signed by Y. B. Chavan and UAE Foreign Minister Ahmed Khalifa Al Suwaidi in the presence of Sheikh Zayed and Indira Gandhi.¹²

In a reciprocal visit, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed visited the UAE in 1976, meeting Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In a joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of the State visit, the two countries reiterated their conviction that rapid growth of technical and economic cooperation between developing countries is of crucial importance to their collective self-reliance and economic development. The Presidents of both countries called for the intensification of efforts to achieve complete and universal disarmament under effective international control. They stressed the importance of harnessing nuclear power for peaceful purposes and agreed that the benefits and knowledge of nuclear technology should be available to all countries. ¹³

Indira Gandhi's landmark visit

The next major visit was that of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in May 1981, a year after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war and the Indian Premier's return to the political helm from the opposition. This visit gave the India-UAE relationship a major boost. Her talks with Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi focused on cooperation among countries in the region to preserve peace and avoid interference by superpowers. The two leaders also discussed the strengthening of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the speedy end to the Iran-Iraq war which was seen as essential to greater stability in the Gulf. At the talks held at ministerial level, the need to promote investment and joint ventures was actively discussed. Proposals for the UAE's participation in the Indian oil sector and the opening of more UAE banks in India were reviewed. Discussions also included a proposal for opening an office of the Indian Investment Centre in the UAE and collaboration in the iron and steel sector.

She described Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid as "noble and pragmatic leaders" and stressed the need to strengthen India's ties with the UAE and other Gulf countries. The Abu Dhabi talks were followed by discussions with Sheikh Rashid in Dubai. ¹⁴

Indira Gandhi also visited Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi. Dr Sheikh Sultan, who still fondly remembers the visit and his personal association with the Gandhi family, presented her with a ceremonial sword on the occasion.¹⁵

Sharjah Ruler travels to India

India-UAE ties were further strengthened the following year when Dr Sheikh Sultan visited New Delhi, Kashmir, Agra, and Lucknow as part of a ten day visit. Impressed by India's progress in science, agriculture and technology, as well as building of democratic institutions, the Ruler of Sharjah said, "It is my wish to cement our ties." Further, disclosing that Sharjah had discovered large reserves of onshore gas, he invited Indian participation in various sectors of the developing Sharjah economy. In Delhi, Dr Sheikh Sultan met President N. Sanjiva Reddy and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The Ruler of Sharjah said he held the Indian Prime Minister in high esteem and that under her leadership, India, as a founder member of the Non-Aligned Movement, could play a positive role in promoting world peace and help solve the Palestinian crisis.¹⁶

Bilateral relations continued to blossom under the tender care of Sheikh Zayed and his Indian counter-parts. Terming the relationship as a "model" that the UAE would like to replicate with other countries, Sheikh Zayed visited New Delhi again in March 1983 to attend the Non-Aligned Movement Summit.¹⁷

The following year Indira Gandhi was assassinated, a tragic event which led to her son, Rajiv Gandhi, becoming Prime Minister. Preoccupied with a host of domestic and international issues, Rajiv Gandhi's term did not witness an official visit to the UAE. However, both he and his wife Sonia made it a point to use a transit visit to Dubai in February 1991 to reach out to the UAE leadership. Rajiv Gandhi, then Leader of the Opposition in Parliament met Sheikh Mohammed in Dubai and Dr Sheikh Sultan in Sharjah.¹⁸

Sheikh Zayed's third visit

In 1992, Sheikh Zayed paid his third visit to India to “deepen the foundations of cooperation and friendship so that it could be felt by the people of both countries”. He was accompanied by UAE Minister of Finance and Industry and Deputy Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Led by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, a new India was taking shape with the launch of comprehensive economic reforms under the supervision of then Finance Minister and current Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh. Sheikh Zayed held talks with Indian leaders on a number of issues of bilateral, regional, and international importance. While the emphasis was to join hands in building “a peaceful and stable environment” in the region, the talks between the two leaders were wide ranging and included the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, relevance of the Non-Aligned Movement under the changed global context, North-South disparity and ways to address them, the importance of peace and stability in South Asia and the Gulf and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Several significant agreements were signed during this visit, including one on avoiding double taxation and preventing fiscal evasion with regard to taxes on income and capital.¹⁹

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in India

HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, then Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces and current Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, visited New Delhi in October 1999 and July 2003. These visits provided a major impetus to India-UAE relations in the defence arena. During the 2003 visit, the two countries signed an agreement on defence cooperation and discussed the possibility of setting up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on terrorism and transnational crime. The agreement provided for cooperation in security and defence policy, as well as the import and export of arms. It also called for mutual assistance in military training,

military medical services, military cultural and sports activities, environmental issues, and pollution caused by the military, particularly at sea.²⁰ This Joint Working Group has since evolved mechanisms for regular interaction between the security agencies of the two countries, especially to counter financial networks involved in funding terrorist organizations. The UAE Armed Forces also regularly send personnel to the National Defence College of India for training.

Security cooperation between India and the UAE was taken one step further by Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L. K. Advani during his visit to the UAE in July 2001. Advani held talks with President Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid in Dubai. He discussed joint efforts to fight international crime based on three cooperation treaties – the Extradition Treaty, the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in Criminal Matters, and the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in Civil Matters – all of which had become effective in May 2000.²¹

President Kalam Chooses the UAE for his First Foreign Tour

The next significant bilateral visit was that of Indian President Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the eleventh President of India, who held office from 2002 to 2007. Reflecting the importance India attaches to its relations with the UAE, Dr Kalam in October 2003 chose the UAE as the first country to which he would pay an official visit. In the UAE, he met Sheikh Zayed and held discussions with current UAE President and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, HH Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who was at that time the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. He delivered lectures to school children and college students on the values of human compassion, education, and civilization, visited GITEX – the region's most important information technology event – and addressed members of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI).²²

At the DCCI, the Indian President, said: “Opportunities for long and mutually beneficial joint ventures exist in pharmaceutical, manufacturing, and entertainment industries. Our institutions, both in the public and private sectors, are willing to work with the DCCI to promote partnerships ranging from education to research, from applications to systems software, from e-commerce to e-governance, from tele-medicine to robotic surgery . . . India has the core competence in biotechnology, nanotechnology, and also in emerging sectors being created as a result of the convergence between all of these, such as Integrated Intelligent Systems.”²³

November 2004 saw President Kalam return to the UAE to pay condolences to the Rulers and people of the country on the sad demise of Sheikh Zayed. Vice-President of India B. S. Shekhawat also visited Dubai in January 2006 on the sad occasion of the demise of Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, then Vice-President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai.

Scaling New Heights

A fresh impetus to strengthen the economic partnership and consolidate investment opportunities for business communities in both countries came with the visit to India in March 2007 by UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. This was his first official visit outside the region after assuming office. He was accompanied during the visit by a high profile delegation that included Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Minister for Interior; Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, Minister for Foreign Trade; Mohammed Al Gergawi, Minister for Cabinet Affairs etc. Sheikh Mohammed, the driving force behind Dubai's emergence as an important financial and business hub, made a number of statements during the visit which reflected his understanding of the shifting balance of power from the West towards the East and the growing importance of India.

Speaking to the UAE business delegation accompanying him, Sheikh Mohammed said he had been monitoring economic developments in India since he last visited the country with his father. He said since assuming the post of Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE in January 2006, he had “taken the initiative of expanding the avenues of economic cooperation with India, especially in new sectors. . . . This visit to a big and friendly country will open doors for you to get active beyond the local circle and into the global one. You have to use this opportunity along with other opportunities made available to you by the government to develop your international investments just as you have done locally.”

Further, addressing Indian captains of industry in New Delhi, Sheikh Mohammed expressed his pleasure at seeing Indian investments in the UAE tripling between 2002 and 2006 and reminded them that two-way trade was still below its true potential. He also identified as possible areas for joint ventures the fields of oil and gas, power, health, construction, pharmaceuticals, real estate development, and chemicals and fertilizers. The visit of the UAE delegation ended with Sheikh Mohammed’s pledge to make the UAE the subcontinent’s top trade partner. ²⁴

Foreign Ministers cement ties

Sheikh Mohammed’s visit of March 2007 imparted immediate momentum to India-UAE relations. The ninth Joint Commission Meeting between the two countries headed by UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee took place shortly thereafter in New Delhi in June 2007. During this meeting, the UAE pushed for even greater Indian participation in the region.

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“We look forward to an increased involvement by India in issues affecting the Gulf and neighbouring countries . . . It is in both our interests to work together more, and more closely,” Sheikh

Abdullah told the media prior to his visit, underlining the close link between security and stability in the Indian subcontinent and the strategic Gulf region.²⁶

The two delegations discussed promoting bilateral cooperation in trade and investment; combating crime, terrorism and illicit activities; education, culture, youth, and sports; health, science and technology, agriculture and environment; manpower; energy, hydrocarbons, petrochemicals and fertilizers; customs cooperation; civil aviation, telecommunications, and other pertinent issues of mutual benefit.

In May 2008, Indian External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee visited the UAE. His discussions with UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah focused on ways to regularize bilateral interaction. It was decided that Foreign Office consultations, which will review major political developments at the bilateral and regional level, would be held regularly. Special emphasis will also be placed on scheduling regular meetings of the India-UAE Joint Commission that will take stock of the economic relationship at a macro-level. It was proposed that the India-GCC dialogue, which is held annually on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, would in future be held in a GCC country or in New Delhi alternatively. which would “eventually result in a structured collective security dialogue at a regional level”.²⁷

The highlight of Mukherjee's visit was his talks with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, during which India and the UAE took a fresh look at strengthening their military ties. The two leaders explored ways to establish a long term defence relationship based on possible joint development and manufacture of sophisticated military hardware in the future. The discussions on joint development of hardware have been seen as a major step forward in enhancing military cooperation between the partners.²⁸

In Dubai, the Indian Minister met Minister of Cabinet Affairs, Mohammed Al Gergawi. Thereafter, Dubai companies such as Dubai Holding, Dubai World Group and EMAAR briefed

Mukherjee on their investments in India. Complimenting the companies for their contributions to the development of infrastructure in India, Mukherjee said these investments were tailor made for India's development priorities. Speaking at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) in Abu Dhabi, Mukherjee said: "We accord the highest importance (to this region) and we remain committed to expanding its frontiers. I am confident that, in the coming years, our relationship will continue to grow from strength to strength."²⁹

With the re-election of the Congress-led United Progressive alliance in the Indian general elections of 2009 and the assumption of office once again by a Government, led by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, Sheikh Abdullah became the first Foreign Minister to be received by the new Government. In a two day visit on June 12-13, 2009, he met the new Indian Foreign Minister S. M. Krishna and discussed further expansion of the multifaceted bilateral relations as well as scaling up of economic and energy ties. He called on Vice-President Hamid Ansari and exchanged views with the Minister for New and Renewable Sources of Energy, Farooq Abdullah.³⁰

President Patil travels to UAE

The climax of recent diplomatic interaction between India and the UAE was the visit to UAE by President Pratibha Patil from November 22-25, 2010 during which she held extensive discussions with the UAE leadership. In a statement before the visit, President Patil said the purpose of her visit was to reaffirm India's interest in strengthening ties with countries in the region, which are a part of India's extended neighbourhood.³¹ The talks between Sheikh Khalifa and President Patil was warm and friendly. Both leaders dwelt on the long tradition of friendship between the two peoples and expressed satisfaction that the trade relationship had grown substantially resulting in both countries becoming the largest trading partners for each other in 2009-2010 with bilateral trade crossing the US\$ 43 billion

mark. Both leaders agreed to enhance the strategic relationship by focusing on areas such as education, science and technology, regional security and many other areas where there is potential for cooperation. President Patil invited UAE investments in projects for enhancing agricultural production in India and especially in the area of food processing and welcomed investments in the infrastructure sector.

Discussions were also held on the need for enhanced security cooperation particularly to address issues relating to counter-terrorism and maritime security. ³²In discussions with UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed both leaders recognized that the UAE acts as a gateway for Central Asia, Africa and West Asia for Indian exports, and offers excellent re-export facilities. ³³

A Shared World Vision

Rooted in historic and economic factors, India-UAE relations have been sustained by their common understanding of political, economic, and security concerns, as well as a strong desire for peace and stability in their neighbourhood. India and the UAE have travelled different paths to independence, development, and progress. They are however united by the fact that both are internationally regarded as unique models with extraordinary achievements to their credit. Their historic experience has directed the formulation of national and foreign policies with several commonalities, the most notable being an openness to the world, a commitment to pluralism, and the quest for peace, stability and security in the region.

The UAE has carved a niche for itself in the world as a country of ideas, innovation, and enterprise. Its geographical proximity to India, long history of economic cooperation and dynamic leadership add further value to the equation. These, combined with the evolution of India into the world's largest democracy and fourth largest economy in the world with a wealth of human resources in every field, point to a clear compatibility of interests

between the two countries. India, being home to over 150 million Muslims, also creates a special bond between the two nations.

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh at a meeting of the Trade and Economic Relations Committee on July 27, 2005 called upon Indians to view the Gulf as part of their country's natural economic hinterland and to come closer to India's neighbours in the Gulf.³⁴ In a statement delivered on November 7, 2008 in New Delhi, he noted that "The Gulf region is an area of vital importance for India's security and prosperity". Echoing similar sentiments, Vice-President of India, and former Ambassador to the UAE Hamid Ansari, has also declared, "The totality of India's interests demands that its 'Look East' policy be supplemented with a 'Look West' policy".³⁵

Similarly, the Rulers of the UAE have recognized the importance of a closer integration with Asia for the nation's future growth and the further potential of the relationship with India. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, during his visit to India in 2007 said, "We know power centres in the world are shifting, and the UAE must be prepared to cooperate with the new centres, including India. . . . Our visit to India reflects the UAE's keenness to extend new bridges of communication between the two countries and explore broader avenues of cooperation in the economic and technological sectors in line with the historic ties between the two peoples."³⁶

With leaders and scholars in India calling for a new 'Look West' policy and the leadership of the UAE pursuing a pro-active policy towards India, it is clearly evident the future is likely to witness an even greater convergence between the two nations and its people.

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- ³⁴ Press release- Pm launches Look West policy to boost Cooperation with Gulf July 27, 2005 <http://pmindia.nic.in/prelease/pcontent.asp?id=278>
- ³⁵ Ansari, M.H. (2009). India and 'The Gulf'. In Khosla, I.P. (ed) India and the Gulf. New Delhi: Konarak Publishers Pvt. Ltd. p36
- ³⁶ Gulf News. March 27, 2007 <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/government/grab-offers-to-invest-in-india-1.168328>